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70 Years Later, 'Our Town' Remains Timeless

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DURHAM, N.H. – In January 1938, the play "Our Town" made its debut in New Jersey. Seventy years later, the play by Thornton Wilder set in the fictional New Hampshire town of Grover's Corners remains one of the most frequently produced and most beloved plays in American theatrical history.

According to theater historian David Richman at the University of New Hampshire, the lasting popularity of "Our Town" – a summertime favorite among New England theatre groups – can be attributed to Wilder's use of minimal scenery and props, the appeal of its ensemble cast and because it deals, at least in part, with nostalgia.

"Wilder is dealing with the timeless. The great ideas and emotions -- love, wonder, the response to death -- are always with us. The play's final tableau, with a grief-stricken George prostrate at the feet of the Emily who is even now moving on beyond him, is as heartbreaking in 2008 as it was when it was first staged in 1938," says Richman, a professor of theatre and dance.

The three-act play is set in a town modeled after several New Hampshire towns in the Monadnock region, including Jaffrey, Peterborough, and Dublin.

"His play sets out to capture and appreciate the small, seemingly insignificant but actually wondrous moments of life, placing them against those immensities of space, time, and eternity. However, it is hard to know the extent to which Wilder -- the most erudite and cosmopolitan of writers -- embraces, rather than probes, the simple verities that the denizens of Grover's Corners, most of them Republicans and Protestants, cling to," Richman says.

"The play praises small-town virtues, but it suggests a near-tragic counterpoint. Emily, as she takes her place among the dead, comes to realize how much of life she failed properly to appreciate as her moments rushed rapidly past," he says. "Would her living abilities have been larger had she grown up in a town whose sense of beauty went beyond the occasional hymn and Handel's Largo?"

Although an accomplished playwright and novelist, Wilder did not achieve critical recognition as a playwright until the production of "Our Town," for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. The play debuted Jan. 22, 1938, and ran for nearly 350 performances on Broadway.

"It was an enormous hit. Whether audiences plumbed the play's depths, or whether they simply soaked in the nostalgic view of turn-of-the-century American small-town life is another matter. Wilder did capture the simple goodness and common sense of the Grover's Corners denizens, and audiences responded," Richman says. "But, as Jeremy McCarter writes in a splendid appreciation in the New York Times, 'Grover's Corners is, in retrospect, an unbearable place: quite content to be homogeneous, conformist, anti-intellectual and lacking 'any culture or love of beauty.' When staged properly, the play doesn't let us merely feel

simple nostalgia. We ought to weep at Emily's famous line, not because she finds earth wonderful, but because she was unable to find it so during her close-minded life in her close-minded town -- which is, of course, our town.' "

According to Richman, what sets "Our Town" apart from plays of the early 20th century and today is its treatment of the great metaphysical questions.

"In an intensely political time (1938), it refuses to be political. Paradoxically, it has something in common with a play that would seem entirely different – Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." Though Kushner's play is intensely political and though Kushner's characters would be hounded out of Grover's Corners, the two plays deal, in their different ways, with time, love, and death," Richman says.

"The great plays -- past and present – enrich the heart and spirit, and they raise the uncomfortable questions. Though Wilder doesn't raise the difficult political questions as much as some critics wish he would, he does force us to contemplate the even more difficult philosophical questions," according to Richman.

So is there still a bit of Grover's Corners, NH, in the Granite State? "I suspect so," Richman says, "both for better and for worse."

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